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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, the Border Early Learning Center (BELC) was established to provide support and training for preschools and communities in South Africa. This report describes the rationale and process of an evaluation of preschools associated with the BELC. (The data and conclusions of the evaluation are not included in this report.) A questionnaire was designed and translated into Xhosa, and was then completed by BELC trainers and preschool teachers. Later, evaluators made field visits to the preschools. In these visits, an ethnographic approach to observation was used. This approach allowed the observers to be informed by the total environment, rather than merely by the answers to questions they posed from their own conceptual frameworks. Conflicts between educational ideals and reality were evident in large student-teacher ratios, and in ambivalence between school and community ideals. The evaluation was carried out in the context of BELC's motivation to provide the best possible education for the maximum number of children. The key variable for survival of a school was the quality of the teacher. The preschool evaluation form is appended. (BC)

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Bernard van Leer Foundation

Studies and Evaluation Papers
2

ED 338384

Assessing pre-schools: an ethnographic approach

(from a South African evaluation)

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Editorial History

The original text of this paper formed an appendix to a report (Whisson, M.G. and Manona, C.W. 'The Pre-schools of the Queenstown Region', Anthropology Department, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa) prepared by the authors for the Queenstown Early Learning Centre on the viability and progress of the pre-schools being supported by the Centre throughout the Ciskei and Transkei.

It was subsequently amended and expanded for inclusion in this Series, where it is published for the first time.

About the Authors

Professor Michael Whisson read Social Anthropology at Cambridge, UK and based his Ph.D thesis on the impact of primary education on the rural Kenya Luo tribe. He taught in British Columbia and conducted research in Hong Kong before settling in South Africa in 1965. He was on the Steering Committee which founded the Athlone Early Learning Centre, and was a founder and board member of 'Grassroots' in Cape Town. As head of the Department of Anthropology at Rhodes University, he has engaged in several research studies with Dr. Manona, with whom he has also evaluated aspects of projects supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Dr. Wele Manona went through his primary schooling in one of the buildings which now houses a pre-school at Peddie, a small village in the Ciskei, and attended secondary school at the Methodist school in Healdtown in the Transkei. He taught for a number of years and, while completing his BA and Honours degrees in anthropology, became famous within the area as a disc-jockey for Xhosa radio. He has been the senior research officer for the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University, Grahamstown since 1977, where he also completed an MA and Ph.D on aspects of Xhosa family life in the Ciskei.

About the project

Some 23 per cent of South Africa's population is dependent on agriculture. Many of the seven million people involved, and members of their families, are labourers on large white-owned farms, while others operate subsistence farms in the so-called black homelands. On the large farms families are dependent on the farmers for their livelihoods and living standards as well as for the provision of education and health services for their children. Such provision is extremely variable and random – many children live long distances from the nearest school; they face great difficulties in pursuing formal education, and are frequently ill-prepared for it.

The Border Early Learning Centre (ELC), which is supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, was established in the 1980s to provide support and training for pre-schools and for communities that establish their own early childhood facilities. In rural areas and on farms, in the absence of government funding, communities have been helped to set up and sustain community schools. The Border ELC helps with teacher training, support and guidance for communities, and encourages further parental and community involvement.

As part of this overall effort, the Border ELC asked the authors to undertake an evaluation of the pre-schools in the programme.

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'I am haunted by the memory of a small child sitting looking at a Ladybird story-book in one of the farm pre-schools we visited this week. He turned the pages quite quickly, until he found a picture of something edible, or a pot. Then he scooped the picture with his hand and shoved the imaginary item into his mouth, smiled – and turned the page!

It was the most imaginative use of literature that I have ever seen in a child.'

Prof. Michael Whisson, Department of Anthropology
Rhodes University, 1990

ASSESSING PRE-SCHOOL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Pre-schools in South Africa grow out of the communities whose children they serve. The idea of such schools may be introduced by outside missionaries from the South African Association for Early Childhood Educare (SAAECE) and the schools themselves nourished by external sponsors from the churches and corporate sector, but whether a pre-school flourishes or withers ultimately depends on the relationships between teachers and the parents of the pupils. If those relationships fail, if the parents decide that what the teachers offer is not worth the contribution in time, organisation or resources demanded of them, then the school will fail. No matter how well the school is financed and equipped, no matter how well the teacher is trained, no matter how clearly the goals are defined and pursued in educational terms, the bottom line remains the same. Obviously, if the responses to these three components is positive, then the school is seen to be offering something of real value which is attractive to most parents and children – but, if the parents come from a cultural milieu which does not recognise those qualities, they will not be persuaded to support the venture.

In carrying out our evaluation of pre-schools in the Border and Ciskei regions of South Africa, we found ourselves looking at a huge variety of schools: some nestling in the midst of middle class, coastal suburbs where many houses include swimming pools and double garages on uncluttered half-acre plots; others operating in hospital wards occupied by long-stay patients suffering from deficiency diseases; at schools in ancient church premises which rise above a sea of closely-packed shanties; at others placed in *rondavels* set in impoverished, unserviced rural villages; at schools where the untrained teacher receives R80 (about US$35) per month, and at schools where the graduate specialist in charge receives over R1,500 (about US$600) per month. We saw schools where a dozen children gather in a garage and others where over a hundred children are divided into classes of twenty or so on the basis of age. What united all these schools was their association with the Border Early Learning Centre (BELC) which provides in-service training, equipment and books, scrap, a (middle class) 'model' school and a team of trainers who visit all the associated schools to advise, encourage and guide according to the needs of the individual schools.

The process of assessment

In order to evaluate this wide range of provision, we could have devised a check list based on a model training school assessing such things as educational and training levels for teachers, equipment, access to fuel, food and water and parental support. Each school could have been rated on that basis. To have done so, however, would have confirmed the generalisation that the wealthier and better educated the community, the 'better' the schools it supports – the only exceptions occurring where generous sponsors combine with remarkable individuals or well-organised churches to support schools in deprived areas.

Our approach was different, in that our assessments centred on the operations of BELC as a whole, in the very wide range of contexts in which it is involved. We

recognised that resources at every level and of every kind are limited and we asked ourselves whether, given those limitations and the number of potential pre-school children in the region, the greatest possible number were benefiting from the work of the pre-school movement. At the policy level BELC does not itself set up and fund schools, but prefers to find and foster them, to build on foundations laid by the community. Given the few resources available, and the number of schools in the region, this makes good sense. At the same time, however, every possible encouragement is given to private operators, hospitals, churches, community groups, farmers and local government bodies to set up schools, which are then fostered by BELC.

Since what BELC actually achieves can only be assessed 'on the ground' where the children are being cared for and educated, we concentrated most of our time and attention on the schools themselves. A comprehensive questionnaire was constructed and has been modified for each successive assessment (the latest example is given here in the Appendix). This was translated into Xhosa so that, regardless of the degree of bilinguality of the trainers who administered them, there would be optimal consistency. The trainers, on their routine visits to the schools, filled in the questionnaire with the teachers on site. Most questions were strictly factual ('How many children are here today?') and could be checked immediately. A few others gave scope for the teacher to mislead the interviewer by giving answers intended to please ('What support do you receive from parents?'). Some of the information could be gathered without any question being asked of the teacher ('What toilet facilities are available?'). We felt that although questionnaires create something of a barrier between interviewer and interviewee and that trainers were not trained interviewers, the established rapport between trainers and teachers would overcome most of these difficulties. With few exceptions, events proved us right – one or two interviews relied on memory rather than on actual visits, but nearly all the schedules were fully completed, and our subsequent visits confirmed their accuracy.

The intensive field work stage involved visits to each of the schools for as long as time allowed, generally in the company of one of the BELC trainers. The purpose of the visits was to enable us to put the factual data (which we checked, as far as possible, at each school) into the context of each community, its environment and its resources. This was the key step.

The ethnographic approach to observation

The essence of the ethnographic approach is to allow the total environmental experience to inform the observers, rather than for the observers to pose questions from their own conceptual framework. The anthropologist seeks to establish how the actors see their world and what their priorities are, rather than to impose a pre-conceived grid upon them. Given the constraints of time available in each place, and a lack of knowledge of the local language in the case of one of us, our observations fell far short of the ideal and we had to rely to a considerable extent on picking up cues based on our own extensive fieldwork experience in the region and elsewhere. The cumulative experience of fieldwork in different places sharpens the eye, nose and ear to receive and interpret signals. After observers have visited half a dozen schools with another twenty in prospect, they are attuned to more than they may be aware of consciously. Teachers respond in subtly different ways to trainers and visitors, which may suggest something about their attitudes to authority, their eagerness to learn and their priorities as far as the children are concerned. The reactions (or lack of them) of the children on first meeting visitors are a clear indication of how they have learned to perceive strange adults, and often also offers clues about how they relate to their teacher. Observing the physical appearance of the children is important: the difference between fresh grime and sweat from a session of free play and ingrained dirt from neglect or an acute shortage of water is soon

identifiable, as is the difference between healthy chubbiness and the bloat of kwashiorkor (a severe form of malnutrition).

The involvement of the community soon becomes apparent to the visitor in the materials available to the children, as well as in the efforts made to impose some sort of order on the site and its environment. These are not wholly objective measurable elements – they have to be 'read' and interpreted in the context of the community and homes from which the children come. It is often a matter of degree – a more regularly swept cow dung floor, a more clearly demarcated play area, a larger quantity of clearly utilised waste material may be indicators that here is a school which is giving the children definitely more than they would get at home.

The ethnographic approach also involves asking ourselves – rather than our informants – what the needs and expectations of the community appear to be for their children, and how far the school is meeting those needs, bearing in mind that they may well not match those of education idealists.

The conflict between the ideal and the real

The pre-school ideal may be to develop an active, questioning, creative child ready to seize every educational opportunity. Yet faced by 80 children in a packed classroom, a primary school teacher may well prefer a child who sits still for as long as needed, who asks no questions and does what he or she is told. Parents want their children to learn, but not to be disruptive and so attract demoralising punishment. These realities are a part of the pre-school environment, and part also of the total experience of socialisation. Whatever she may have picked up on her BELC courses, the teacher is a part of this environment and culture. She may want to change it but it is more realistic for an evaluator to recognise that the immediate environment in which she has to operate will exercise its own constraints on her.

The relationship between parents and the pre-school are even more complex than those between the pre-school and the primary school. Parents want their children to learn so that they can compete in the world of limited employment and higher educational opportunities. For this, many will make great sacrifices. What they do *not* want is their children to lose respect for them as parents or for their customs – the ritual cycles which bind the family and community together and make some sense even out of the peri-urban social order. Education for 'success' in a predominantly urban and industrial economy inevitably alienates rural and peri-urban slum dwellers from many of the values and relationships which sustain life, however unsatisfactorily, in the children's own communities. The engine which pulls the children towards their economic and educational goals all too easily becomes uncoupled from the community which fuels it.

The ambivalence here is profound but rarely consciously articulated. A Manichean world view, wherein all good things are mystically united and all evil things similarly linked – a view which informs the concept of witchcraft as well as much political thinking – cannot readily handle the idea that the more effective Western-style education is, the greater will be the alienation between generations, and between 'successes' and 'failures' in the system. The local cultural image of the 'good' child emphasises passivity and obedience, rather than vitality and questioning. On the whole, teachers, having been reared in that tradition themselves and being expected by parents to produce 'good' children, find it in their own immediate best interest to encourage passivity and conformity rather than to promote vitality and questioning, regardless of the philosophy and context of their training and the programmes which appear on the schoolroom walls.

We have emphasised these aspects of the total social and educational environment to illustrate a holistic, ethnographic approach. We could just as readily have considered the nutritional needs of the child as defined by professional dieticians, working within the framework of a Western scientific culture, as against the resources actually available in and to the community – and the moral value placed on different sorts of food.

The values and the ambivalences between pre-school educational and local ideals manifest themselves in what the teachers, pupils and parents do and do not do, and in how they respond to open-ended questions about their needs and aspirations for the school and the community. A striking example of this is the virtual absence of vegetable gardens in the rural schools, despite the schools being a part of the food, agriculture, craft, and education programme (FACE), the intention of which was to bring children together to feed them, to promote agriculture and craft work among underemployed parents, to feed and support the schools, and to provide pre-school education.

In areas where malnutrition was rife, children came for the food and stayed for the education, but rare indeed were schools where the other two components of the programme were implemented. In part, agriculture and craft work – labour-intensive and with generally erratic and low returns – represent a way of life from which education is intended to emancipate the children. To have them running together – worse, with the desired food and education dependent in part upon the agriculture and crafts – pits the denied and dismal science of economics against the millenarian vision of progress.

A context for evaluation

The material and moral culture, the structured opposition between good and evil, future and past, progress and stagnation, hope and despair provide the context in which the evaluation of the schools and the programme as a whole should begin. We have to ask ourselves some general questions: Is it more rational to research, plan, build and start a school only when there is a reasonable assurance of long-term success, than it is to respond to *every* request that is made to start a school, and then to accept the Darwinian logic of the survival of the fittest? Given a limited volume of resources – financial, material and in skilled personnel – should these be concentrated to produce 'top quality' pre-schooling for relatively few, or dispersed to produce the best possible for the maximum numbers? Should quality drive out quantity, and the desire for excellence override the merely acceptable?

BELC chose the latter options in each case, and we believe that it was generally right to do so. The moral case for directing effort towards the huge, deprived sector of the population in South Africa is strong, and inevitably means spreading resources thinly. Further, given the extent to which voluntary contributions in materials, accommodation and labour are utilised in pre-schooling, a maximum spread of the specialised resources of BELC promotes the greatest possible direction of communal resources throughout the region into pre-schooling. Since this is indeed the prevailing policy, it was unrealistic to judge each school in terms of an ideal local model, let alone a middle-class Western one. In a desert, every green shoot is a success, and the few that survive to replicate themselves are small miracles. This vision had to inform our point of departure.

The evaluation of the schools, therefore, had to be done in terms of their probable survival, as well as the inputs required from or through BELC to sustain them. In most cases, the key variable was the quality of the teacher herself – her ability to relate to the children, to their parents and community leaders, and to BELC as a conduit for crucial resources. Since nearly all the schools are autonomous, their continuation does not, in theory, depend on their links with

BELC, but sponsors gain confidence from such involvement, promotion and support – whether those sponsors are local governments, churches, charitable organisations, farmers' wives or businesses. The teachers are the main mediators between the community and BELC. Hence our assessment of their ability to survive and grow was of central significance, and was based both on what they said and on the tangible evidence of what they had achieved or persuaded others to do. Other relevant criteria – also largely visible within the schools – included the commitment of the parents and children as indicated by attendance and material (including financial) support.

Assessing future viability

Assessing the viability of the schools, given the impact that a change of teacher might make, was a hazardous enterprise, and inevitably took second place to an assessment of the contribution being made by BELC itself. As in the case of the individual schools, such an assessment can only be made in the context of the total environment of the organisation. To some extent it is constrained by the traditions and values of the pre-school 'movement' as a whole as represented by the SAAECE, which stem from a strongly middle class, Western and academic culture. The pre-school 'movement' has a sub-culture of its own – a language or jargon, a set of goals and values enshrined in its various publications and articulated through its training components. BELC, we observed, mediates the culture through a creative interpretation to meet the needs of its multifarious constituency, by a management technique which endeavours to live out pre-school ideals. Rather than impose given ways of doing things, the management promotes learning through experience and experimentation so that trainers, teachers and pupils alike learn what actually 'works' for them. Minimal guidance is imposed, and is largely aimed at protecting the plant, personnel and children from coming to serious harm. The rest is communicated through encouragement, collaboration, action and assessment. As a result, sub-cultural clashes are minimised and even when the management cannot fully comprehend the complex forces working in any particular environment, tolerance compensates for any lack of understanding, and goodwill is assumed until it is positively disproved. Lest this approach be seen as casual, it should be noted that it is accompanied by meticulous accounting and thorough recording and reporting procedures, aspects of good management which are not incompatible with the general philosophy, but which are essential complements to it.

Our assessment process here used the methodology of participant observation – sharing in the life of BELC at its headquarters, observing all the interactions between staff, talking 'shop' with individuals on a one-to-one basis in every possible situation, 'being there' and absorbing information and experience while writing up notes in the large open-plan office.

Our final report on each assessment involved some statistical work on the questionnaires, and followed an attempt to classify the schools in terms of their origins, support systems and the socio-economic level of the communities in which they were set. We also kept a very full ethnographer's diary which was written up each day as soon as possible after the events we observed and which enabled us to put the individual schools much more fully into context. We endeavoured to keep the reports reasonably concise and readable, with a minimum of tables and statistics. Given the nature of the material and the methods of collecting the data, we considered that extensive statistics would give a spurious impression of precision to what was largely fuzzy data. The statistical material is valuable primarily for throwing up problems which our observations and analysis have to explain, and for providing a check on the qualitative data.

The final report was supported by a tape of the ethnographic diary and by annotated photographs with the negatives. The former provided details and impressions which could assist BELC directors in various ways, but which were

neither appropriate nor adequately substantiated to justify inclusion in the formal report. With the aid of modest technology, the diary and photographs could be edited to form a part of a slide and tape presentation for use by BELC.

APPENDIX

PRE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

1. (a) Name of School and Location .....

   (b) How long has the community been here? .....

   (c) When did the school open? .....

   (d) Who started it? .....

2. How many teaching staff? .....

3. How many support staff e.g. cooks, cleaners etc.? .....

4. Who are the teaching staff?

Name	*Age*	*Education Level*	*Training Courses*	*Year of Last Course*	*Salary*
1					
2					
3					
4					

5. How many children enrolled? .....

6. How many children present on the day of visit? .....

7. How many days per week is school open? .....

8. When does school open? ..... a.m. and close? ..... p.m.

9. Number of enrolled children under 4 ..... 4-6 ..... 7+ .....

10. What records are kept on the children?

(a) Attendance	Yes/No	(c) School activities	Yes/No
(b) Health	Yes/No	(d) Contacts with parents	Yes/No

11. Are these records reliable? .....

12. How many rooms in use?
    (a) Exclusive to school .....

    (b) Used by other groups at other times .....

13. What equipment does the school possess?
    (a) Furniture (tables, shelves, etc.) .....

    (b) Ablution equipment (toilets, towels, etc.) .....

    (c) Outdoor equipment (swing, jungle gym, bats, etc.) .....

    (d) Creative activity equipment .....

    (e) Fantasy equipment .....

14. What sources of water are there?

(a) River	Yes/No	Distance from school ..... m
(b) Tank from roof	Yes/No	
(c) Other (specify)		

15.(a) What toilet facilities exist? .....

(b) What is their condition? .....

16.(a) Is there a First Aid kit in the school? Yes/No
(b) Has the teacher been trained in its use? Yes/No

17.(a) Where is the nearest trained nurse? ..... km away

(b) How can a hospital/doctor be reached? .....

18.(a) What area is *available* for cultivation? ..... hectares

(b) What area is *good* for cultivation? ..... hectares

(c) What area is *actually* being cultivated ..... hectares

19.(a) What crops have been reaped? .....

(b) What use was made of them? .....

(c) What crops are in the ground? .....

20.(a) Does the school have a parent's group/committee/PTA? .....

(b) When did the committee last meet? .....

(c) When is the *next* committee meeting? .....

(d) What help do committee members give? .....

21.Do parents help in the activities of the school?

- Garden work Yes/No
- Craftwork Yes/No
- General Maintenance Yes/No
- Fundraising Yes/No

Other .....

22. Do they profit themselves or the school by these activities? .....

23.(a) How do the centres cover their annual budgets? (School fees, fundraising, sponsorship) .....

(b) Do you get financial support from any other bodies? Yes/No

Whom? .....

24. Is the school busy or inactive? Busy/Inactive

25.Are the children:

(a) Concerned mainly for the food	All	most	some	none
(b) Lethargic	All	most	some	none
(c) Organised for joint activities	All	most	some	none
(d) Noisy and cheerful	All	most	some	none

26. Do any children show obvious signs of illness/disability?

Malnutrition ... Skin disease ... other (specify) .....

27. Is food supplied regularly? – note problems .....

28. Community Profile
Give a short description of the type of community that you work with.

About the series

Studies and Evaluation Papers is a series of background documents drawn from field experience to present relevant findings and reflections on 'work in progress'. The series therefore acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

As such, the findings, interpretations, conclusions and views expressed are exclusively those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Some of the contributions arise directly out of field work, evaluations and training experiences from the worldwide programme supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. Others are contributions which have a particular relevance to that programme. All are aimed at addressing issues relating to the field of early childhood care and development.

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Contributions to this series are welcomed. Suggestions should in the first instance be addressed to: Willem van der Eyken, Studies and Evaluation, Bernard van Leer Foundation, at the address given below.

About the Foundation

The **Bernard van Leer Foundation** is an international, philanthropic and professional institution based in The Netherlands. Created in 1949 for broad humanitarian purposes, the Foundation concentrates its resources on support for the development of community-led and culturally appropriate initiatives that focus on the developmental needs of children from birth to eight years of age. Currently, the Foundation supports some 100 major projects in more than 40 developing and industrialised countries.

As part of its mandate, the Foundation also supports evaluation, training and the dissemination of project experiences to an international audience. It communicates the outcomes of these activities to international agencies, institutions and governments, with the aim of improving practice and influencing policies to benefit children.

The Foundation's income is derived from the Van Leer Group of Companies – established by Bernard van Leer in 1919 – a worldwide industrial enterprise of which the Foundation is the principal beneficiary. In accordance with its Statutes, the Foundation gives preference in its project support to activities in countries which have an industrial involvement with the manufacuring companies.

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